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AUTHOR Degenhart, R. Elaine; Takala, Sauli
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ABSTRACT

The IEA Study of Writing was prepared in response to an increased concern for an interest in world literacy. Additional issues addressed were: (1) setting learning in the context of the cultural framework, curricular emphases and teaching practices, rather than just determining the level of achievement, and (2) making it possible for each participating country/school system to assess its relative strengths and weaknesses in writing instruction against an international background. Papulations for the study were chosen from 3 stages of schooling and from 14 countries. Each student in the sample populations wrote at least 3 compositions from a total corpus of 14 different task versions. The compositions were supplemented by background information supplied in questionnaires completed by students, teachers, and school administrators. The rationale for the instruments used and the expected results of the study are outlined. (JAZ)

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ABSTRACT

INTERNATIONAL STUDY OF WRITING: WHY AND HOW?

R. Elaine Degenhart

and

Sauli Takala

The IEA International Study of Writing was inaugurated in response to an increased concern and interest in world literacy. The importance of writing as well as reading in society has gained recognition in a recent movement toward a greater balance between the two forms of literacy in education. This study addresses this issue with the additional purposes of (1) setting learning in the context of the cultural framework, curricular emphases and teaching practices, rather than just determining the level of achievement, and (2) making it possible for each participating country/school system to assess its relative strengths and weaknesses in writing instruction against an international background.

The study consists of fourteen countries, each testing one to three age groups (populations). The students in the sample have each written at least three compositions from a total corpus of fourteen different task versions. These compositions (the dependent variable) were supplemented by background information supplied in questionnaires completed by the students, teachers, and school administrators involved in the study (the independent variables).

This paper outlines the purpose of the study, the rationale for the instruments used, and the expected results.

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INTERNATIONAL STUDY OF WRITING: WHY AND HOW?

R. Elaine Degenhart
University of Illinois and
Institute for Educational Research, Jyväskylä
and
Sauli Takala
Institute for Educational Research,
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

With the growing awareness of the importance of literacy, composition, perhaps more than reading, has become a focal point for critics of schools. Writing, for obvious reasons, is one of the most visible products of education. Incorrect usage and spelling have been interpreted as signs of personal scholastic failure, and the alleged widespread deterioration of writing ability as an indication of inadequacies in whole school systems. In view of the importance of writing in society and in the educational system, it is not surprising that some countries/school systems have begun to assess systematically the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of writing.

The study reported here was mounted to accommodate this internationally strengthened interest in the assessment of writing. This reflects the recognition of the central place that the study of the mother tongue occupies in the school curriculum. Introducing students to written language, and thus promoting literacy, has traditionally been perhaps the principal task of the school. Learning to read has always been emphasized, while writing has tended to receive somewhat less attention. Recently there has been a movement toward a greater balance between the two forms of literacy. The IEA study seeks to accommodate this interest, with two additional purposes: (1) to set learning in the context of the cultural framework, curricular emphases and teaching practices, rather than just to ascertain the level of achievement, and (2) to make it possible for each participating country/school system to

assess its relative strengths and weaknesses in writing instruction against an international backdrop.

Who participated in the study?

This is a study of the teaching and learning of written composition in the schools of fourteen countries/school systems: Chile, England and Wales, Federal Republic of Germany (Hamburg), Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, Thailand, and United States. Several other countries have participated in various phases of the study, but for a number of reasons were not involved in the full range of its activities, which included curriculum analysis, pilot testing, main testing, and data analysis.

Three stages of schooling were seen as significant points for students and became the populations tested in the study. Population A is defined as students at or near the end of primary education and the self-contained classroom. Population B consists of students at or near the end of compulsory education. Population C comprises students at or near the end of the academic secondary school. For Populations A and C there were a minimum of fifty schools in each country's sample, and for Population B each country sampled at least one hundred schools.

What are some specific differences in a study of writing?

One of the most important considerations the project had to deal with was the fact that writing differs, for example, from mathematics and science, in that the criteria of what is the correct or at least a good response may vary somewhat from culture to culture. It would be presumptuous to maintain that there is only one single correct product as a response to a typical composition task. A typical characteristic of all composition tasks (not only in mother tongue instruction but in many other subjects as well) is that there are several acceptable approaches and several acceptable products.

There tends to be a fair degree of agreement within certain cultures, which are sometimes called interpretive communities, but cultures may differ in terms of

a) what functions of writing are emphasized in school;

b) what patterns of organization (style, rhetoric) are preferred and rewarded;

c) what are appropriate topics to write about;

d) what is the appropriate approach to writing (e.g., personal vs. impersonal, serious vs. humorous);

e) what is the appropriate form of task instruction (e.g., mere title vs. detailed prompting);

f) what is the appropriate time to allow students to write in response to an assignment;

g) what are the appropriate criteria for rating compositions.

This essential cultural relativism is at the same time one of the major problems of the project and one of the most interesting and challenging aspects of the study. A study like ours seems to address central areas of comparative education. On the one hand, it can be asked if cultural differences are so large that valid comparisons between student writing are at all feasible. Very little is known of cultural patterns and preferences in this area. For this reason we were prepared to be content with fairly modest results. What we hope to be able to do is to get a better idea of the differences and provide good descriptions of them.

On the other hand, since not much is known, it can also be asked to what extent there actually are distinct cultural patterns in writing or whether such a notion is a stereotype based on anecdotal evidence. Is there some general pattern as well as variation within each culture and to what degree is there overlap?

Another major problem for the study is the fact that in most cases students are writing in their mother tongue but in some countries they will be writing using the language of instruction, which may not be the mother tongue.

Thus we have concluded that the written composition study differs from other current studies quite clearly through the fact that (a) the response of each task is not fully definite at the outset but becomes more definite during the process of writing, (b) there is a large store of potentially applicable knowledge, and (c) there is a fairly wide choice of alternative routes to the goal.

What audience will the study serve?

In planning the study, the Steering Committee was faced with the fact that there was very little international cooperation in the field of mother tongue teaching, and that most participating countries lacked good accounts of writing practices and of students' writing performance. In addition, there seemed to be a clear need for defining the domain of writing as a starting point of the study. Finally, it would be necessary to develop a procedure which would make it possible to rate compositions written by students in several countries and in several different languages in as comparable a manner as possible.

Given this situation, the Steering Committee of the project considered mainly three alternative approaches. Approach A would focus on the classroom level by gathering detailed data on teaching practices and attempt to determine whether some practices emerge as consistently effective in several school systems. Approach B would place the emphasis on writing tasks in order to survey the performance of a representative sample of students, and various sub-groups, on a good sample of tasks. In Approach C a great number of background variables pertaining to national economic, social and educational systems as well as

school and classroom variables would be measured and related to student achievement.

Each approach was aimed at providing information of particular interest to a specific audience. The primary audience of Approach A was considered to be curriculum planners and teacher educators. In addition to Audience A, Approach B would be attractive also to linguists, especially to scholars interested in cross-cultural rhetorics. Approach C would be of special interest to policy-makers and students of educational policy and systems, who concern themselves with the output of educational systems in the light of social, economic and educational factors.

In practice, it turned out to be difficult to reach a clear consensus on the priority of any of the three approaches. Therefore, as a compromise, data collection was planned in such a way that, at some stage of analysis, the data allow some answers for all three audiences. However, as work on the project progressed, Approach C seemed to lose much of its appeal for the group of researchers involved in the study. So little is known about the teaching of writing and about student performance in writing that Approaches A and B emerged as the first priority. Answering such questions first seemed to be necessary before attempting to answer system-level questions about factors that might possibly be related to writing performance.

Consequently, it was concluded that the study would make the most meaningful contribution (a) by providing a good assessment of how well the school systems have succeeded in helping students to become flexible writers, i.e., to write competently on a number of different tasks, (b) by producing good descriptions of how composition is taught in schools, (c) by trying to determine whether certain teaching practices contribute to good learning outcomes in several school systems.

Since this subject area is so strongly influenced by cultural characteristics, it was apparent that the national results would have to be interpreted, first and foremost, by each National Center. This has been strongly emphasized as well as the need to involve the national communities of writing instruction and writing research in the planning, conduct and reporting of the study.

What did we wish to accomplish?

With this cultural and research context in mind, the IEA International Study of Written Composition was designed to accomplish the following tasks:

(1) To contribute to the conceptualization of the domain of writing and particularly the domain of school-based written composition;

(2) To develop an internationally appropriate set of writing tasks and a system for assessing compositions which is applicable across countries/school systems and across languages;

(3) To describe recent developments and the current state of instruction in written composition in the participating countries/school systems;

(4) To identify factors which explain differences and patterns in the performance of written composition and other outcomes, with particular attention to cultural background, curriculum and teaching practices; and

(5) To make a contribution toward solving problems related to the assessment of essay-type answers, particularly when more than one language is involved.

How was the dependent variable dealt with?

The greatest challenge in the study has been the work on the dependent variable, since writing assignments and expected writing performance might vary from one school system to another. In order to understand and compare the approaches taken in different school systems, we needed a systematic account of the domain of school writing. In this

regard, three problem areas had to be addressed: (1) the construction of writing tasks, (2) the allocation of writing tasks, and (3) the rating of student scripts.

As a first task in addressing these problems, the key appeared to be in a more detailed specification of the domain of writing. Accordingly a system was developed based on a theory of written discourse. In this system the primary purpose and audience of writing is related to the level and object of the cognitive processes involved in the writing task.

On the basis of this domain specification system, and after a careful scrutiny of the writing curricula and typical writing tasks/topics used in the participating countries, nine different task types containing 14 different task versions were developed. These tasks emphasized several important perspectives.

(1) Tasks that emphasize the perspective of the writer

Task 5: write a personal story

Task 8: write a "free" composition on an ambiguous and evocative pictorial stimulus

(2) Tasks that emphasize the perspective of the topic

Task 2: summarize a text

Task 3: retell a story (in a shorter form)

Task 4a: describe a ritual mask

Task 4b: describe a process of doing something

Task 7: write a reflective essay

(3) Tasks that emphasize the perspective of the reader

Task 6: try to persuade the reader to share the writer's strong view about something

(4) Tasks that have several perspectives

Task 1a: describe a desired bicycle to an uncle who wishes to buy

one as a birthday present

Task 1b: describe oneself to a penfriend whom the student is going to visit so as to make it possible for the penfriend to identify the student as he comes to meet the student

Task 1c: write a note to the principal/headmaster cancelling a scheduled meeting

Task 1d: leave a message at home telling where the student has gone after school

Task 1e: write a letter applying for an advertised summer job

(Note that the relative writer-reader social status and the topic is varied systematically within the variations of Task 1.)

Task 9: write a letter to a younger student who is coming to study at the same school as the writer, telling the new student how he/she should write in the new school to get good grades.

The sampling of tasks is more comprehensive than is typical in writing assessments. However, tasks were rotated in classes so that each student wrote on only 3 (sometimes 4) tasks, which differed in terms of writing stimulus. After some negotiation and revisions based on pilot testing, there was a high agreement that the final sets of tasks provided a fair measure of students' writing ability in all participating school systems.

Within this agreement, however, it was recognized that different cultures may have somewhat different views of how to produce discourse for different purposes and in different contexts. Thus there may be some variation in the way students in the participating countries write about the IEA tasks. However, it is assumed that raters in participating countries can, after discussion and training, come to share a largely similar view of the merits of compositions, in spite of potentially

different ways of discourse production. Unlike a subject like mathematics and science, rating involves judgement. However, as in the fine arts, raters can develop their sensitivity to merit and write a critical comment on each composition. The empirical verification of this basic assumption through careful checking of thoroughly trained raters was an essential condition for an evaluation study which presupposes that scoring is done in a sufficiently uniform manner in all participating countries.

After considering and trying out various scoring systems (holistic, primary trait, analytical), it was agreed that the most appropriate one combined a holistic overrall impression marking and analytical marking. Writing competence within this system is understood to consist of "discourse-structuring competence" (or rhetorical competence) and of "text-producing competence". Rhetorical competence is assumed to require both "cognitive competence" and "social competence". Cognitive competence is manifested in the ability of writers to make readers easily recognize the communicative intent. Text-producing competence presupposes "linguistic competence" and "motor competence", which are rated in accordance with national norms.

What were the independent variables?

A major aspect of the study has been a comprehensive analysis of the context of written composition teaching in the participating countries. In order to provide this context, each country provided a set of ratings indicating to what extent certain objectives (content areas and processes) are covered in the curriculum at each population level. These ratings, collected by means of a Curriculum Questionnaire, were used as a guide in preparing both the tests and questionnaires and will be used in interpreting results. In addition, this data was supplemented by a National Case Study, which outlines in particular (a) national literary

developments, (b) schools of thought with regard to mother tongue education, (c) the position of teachers and education, (d) examinations and assessment procedures, (e) minimum competency movements, and (f) writing outside of school. Using an Interview Schedule developed by the Steering Committee, each of the National Research Coordinators gathered data from a number of national experts which was then complemented by reviews of written documents. Such case studies are considered useful products in themselves, but they are also expected to be of great use in the interpretation of the results.

Of particular interest in the area of school writing context are the portraits of writing instruction that the very specific Teacher Questionnaire data will provide. This questionnaire was given to all the teachers who teach written composition to the students in the samples in order to obtain information on the teachers' qualifications, experience, teaching and feedback methods, etc. It is with this information that the study hopes to find out what teaching practices might be related to good writing performance. A School Questionnaire was answered by the school principals and provides data on the community and the school.

All questions in the Student and Teacher Questionnaires were based on the theoretical model developed for the study, and therefore, presumably are variables of potential descriptive and explanatory interest. As a general principle, countries were also encouraged to add other types of national options to the basic international components, provided that the latter is not jeopardized. As a result of this careful planning, the total testing program in any given country is perceived as appropriate by students, teachers and other interested parties, and provides information that is relevant in terms of national problems in the instruction of written composition.

What results can be expected?

The scoring scheme was tested for the first time during the third International Study Committee Meeting in Urbana in the spring of 1984. The results of this scoring session were thoroughly discussed and it was concluded that in spite of a great effort, the scoring metric is too elastic to allow robust cross-national comparisons of scores on any one task or groups of tasks. For anyone working in the assessment of written composition, the results in an international attempt to create a fully comparable scoring procedure are not surprising. In fact, we have been somewhat surprised that we have been able to solve as many problems as is the case.

While robust comparisons of achievement across countries are doubtful, we do not consider that we have failed in our attempt. It appears that tasks 1, 2, and 3 of the study design outlined above will be successfully accomplished. We have specified the domain of school-based writing; we have developed an internationally appropriate set of writing tasks; and we are providing descriptions of the recent developments and the current state of instruction in written composition in the participating countries and school systems. That is more than some of us had dared to expect.

How will the project be reported?

Three international reports have been planned. The first report is nearing completion and presents the development of the tasks with comments on their construct and curricular validity; the development of the scoring scheme with comments on its construct validity; and the presentation of the international rating scale with comments. The second report will place the various depictions of writing instruction within a larger cultural framework using the data gathered with the various questionnaires and the National Case Studies. The third report will

focus on the dependent variable and report on the scoring in each educational system, the types of meaningful scores that can be compared, and the results of the approved comparative exercises.

In addition to the international reports, each participating country is expected to write a major national report presenting the national results, preferably in the international perspective. National Centers are encouraged to supplement these reports with shorter publications making the maximum use of the data and providing the greatest possible dissemination of the study results.

For such a comprehensive study, this has necessarily been only a very brief introduction to the many possible directions for analysis and interpretation of a massive data base on a very complex and vital subject. We only hope that we have been able to excite your curiosity and to whet your appetite for further research and reports in this area.

Selected List of Publications

Purves, A. C. 1984. In search of an internationally-valid scheme for scoring compositions. College Composition and Communication, 35(4).

Purves, A. C., Soter, A., Takala, S., and Vähäpassi, A. 1984. Towards a domain-referenced system for classifying composition assignments. Research in the Teaching of English, 18(4).

Purves, A. C., and Takala, S. (Eds.). 1982. An international perspective on the evaluation of written composition (Special issue). Evaluation in Education: An International Review Series, 5(3).

Takala, S., and Vähäpassi, A. 1983. On the specification of the domain of writing (Report 333/1983). Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, Institute for Educational Research, Finland. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 240 576)

Takala, S., and Vähäpassi, A. 1985. International study of written

composition. Paper presented at the International Writing Convention, Norwich, England, April, 1985. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 257 096)

Takala, S., and Vähäpassi, A. (in press). Written communication as an object of comparative research. Comparative Education Review.

*Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 16-20, 1986.